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ABSTRACT

The context and preliminary results of an ongoing research project involving parents in the University of Sheffield's (English) Early Literacy Development Project are described. The project developed programs involving at-home work with parents and in-school work for families with preschool children. Initial discussion identified four lines of research leading to the project; these include research on parental involvement in the teaching of reading, school attainment in literacy, preschool intervention for disadvantaged children, and emergent literacy. The discussion in this paper covers: (1) ideas basic to the approach of working with parents of preschool children to encourage the emergence of literacy; (2) programs of the Sheffield project; (3) ways of working with parents that maintain the flexibility required by a child-centered orientation and the structure required for coherent work and research; and (4) emerging findings. (RH)

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN PRESCHOOL LITERACY DEVELOPMENT*

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INTRODUCTION

We would like to describe some work we have been doing with parents in the Sheffield Early Literacy Development Project. It is essentially a research project - still at an early stage - so we want to sandwich the description of the work itself between some remarks on the *research context* in which we think it belongs and something on *research findings* now emerging.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Four lines of research led into the project (handout, figure 1).

First, there is research into <u>parental involvement in the teaching of reading</u> (some of it, research carried out at Sheffield). We have learned from this how very *positively* parents respond when schools really try to

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involve them (one interesting method - to which We will return later - being home visiting). Involving parents in the teaching of reading is effective in some cases, but not in all. That may be because it has often had a rather narrrow concept of literacy, and has been aimed at children *after* they get to school. Perhaps we need a broader concept of literacy and work with parents before school.

A second line of research concerns children's <u>school attainment in literacy</u>. We know that parental help there is very influential, and we also know that children's knowledge of literacy at school entry is a strong predictor of how they will do later.

Our third line is research outside the field of literacy which has established the value of <u>preschool intervention</u> for disadvantaged children - both long term and short term. The more parents are involved in programmes, the greater the benefits. (Here again, home visiting is a valuable method.)

We do not need to say much about the fourth line of research which leads into our project because this Institute is all about <u>emergent literacy</u>. For us, the emergent literacy perspective gives a clearer view of the interdependence of reading and writing, the importance of environmental print as well as early writing and use of books, the significance of preschool roots, the

centrality of the home, and the literacy achievements of children and parents from even the poorest families.

Put these four lines of research together and you have a strong case for working with parents of preschool children to encourage the emergence of literacy.

But how is it to be done? Is it possible? Can we share the insights of emergent literacy with all parents, including those from poor backgrounds?

SOME KEY IDEAS

Our approach is based on some key ideas - a kind of theory (handout, figures 2 and 3).

For example, we have come to understand the power of the parent's role in terms of three things they can provide for emergent readers and writers - a <u>model</u> of literacy, <u>opportunities</u> for learning, and <u>recognition</u> of the child's achievements. Some parents probably provide these more meaningfully and more frequently than others (and some take a more explict instructional role too).

We have focused on what we regard as three strands of literacy development - children's experiences of <u>environmental print</u>, of <u>early writing</u>, and of <u>sharing</u>

books. For each of these, parents have the potential to provide a model, opportunities, and recognition.

We have also focused on at-home learning (in deliberate contrast to those who assume that parental involvement means getting parents to support children's *in-school* learning).

It may help here to draw a distinction between the focus and the location of work with parents. Although the focus may be on children's home learning, the work with parents to influence it could be located either in schools (or centres) or in the parents' homes. In fact, in our project, we have tried both home and school locations.

THE SHEFFIELD EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The present aim of the Sheffield project is to find practical ways of working with parents to promote early literacy development in the home (but *not*, at this stage, to measure the effects of such work).

There is a project team of three (Peter Hannon, Jo Weinberger, and Cathy Nutbrown) which has developed programmes of at-home work with parents (home visiting) and in-school work (group meetings) targetted primarily on children in the middle of the preschool period -

around two-and-half to three years of age - but suitable for other preschool children in a family too.

Families were invited to take part in the project solely on the basis of living close to the project school and having children in the target age range. (We had an 80% take-up.)

This is an exploratory study so we began with a small enough number of children to permit fairly detailed case studies. There have been 20 children so far, from 14 families.

We avoided selecting families but, given the neighbourhood of the school, we knew that they would be in the middle to low income range (in fact some have very low incomes). Only about half have fathers in employment. About a quarter are single parent families. The majority of parents left school as soon as they could without formal qualifications, and those in work mostly have blue collar jobs.

WAYS OF WORKING WITH PARENTS

How did we work with the parents? We have tried to strike a balance between the flexibility required by our child-centred orientation and the structure required for coherent work and research.

The at-home work has been a programme of five fortnightly visits (plus before and after visits) by one of the project team. We followed a rough structure of 'review-introduce-plan' so that we would review with the parent the children's literacy activities since the previous visit, we would introduce a new idea or activity and some kind of plan of what might be done next with the child would be agreed with the parent. Books were introduced in all visits. Parents could borrow from a range of attractive good quality children's literature. Basic drawing/writing materials (sheets of plain paper, a thick pencil, pencil sharpener, ballpoint pen, lined exercise book, scrapbook, and a plastic wallet for storage) were introduced in the first visit and replenished as necessary. Parents were asked to save children's work - later this could be looked back at to show development. Other activities have included making books, using photographs, cutting, sticking and labelling, finding print in the home and neighbourhood, matching logos, and trying different kinds of drawing/writing materials.

In school we have had a programme of five meetings to give parents a chance to share experiences in a small group and to have a more formal input from us. We have had a creche. Topics have included family literacy, print in the environment, the development of mark making and writing, how children enjoy books, judging quality in

books, sharing books and stories with children, using public libraries, methods of literacy teaching in schools, and recognising the emergence of literacy. We have used group discussion, videos, slides, overhead transparencies of children's work, displays of books, hanouts, information about research, sharing of observations, and a 'jigsaw' profile of literacy development (of which, more in a moment).

There is more about this work in a booklet published by the University, *Ways of working with parents to promote early literacy development*.[1]

We can look at it in terms of the three strands of literacy experience - environmental print, early writing, and book sharing - mentioned earlier.

In relation to environmental print, for example, we have suggested to parents that they make their use of it in everyday activities such as travelling or shopping obvious to children. We have worked with parents and children in matching logos and labels from magazines and packaging, in photographing print in the home and neighbourhood, in showing slides of print in the local shops, and in adding to print in the home by putting captions on children's work. We have tried to help parents recognise how much children can make sense of print.

In relation to writing, we have again tried to sensitise parents to their influence as models. We have explored with them the effect of providing different writing implements and materials. We have shared research insights into writing development, including the idea that function matters more than form.

In relation to sharing books, the most important thing was to get parents using lots of good ones. We lent books from the project and took everyone to the public library to show them what was available. We have discussed books, and how we can enjoy them with children. We have pointed out the power of the parent as a reading model, and we tried to increase recognition of childrens early achievements in understanding stories and using books.

One way of helping parents recognise specific literacy achievements is to show a selection of them as pieces of a jigsaw (see <u>Ways of working with parents to promote early literacy development</u>, p.23), e.g. 'makes letter-like marks', 'asks what labels say' or 'pretends to read to others'. Parents can have their own copy and enjoy shading in different pieces to show development. It suggests that literacy abilities are interrelated but not necessarily in a hierarchy.

EMERGING FINDINGS

We have been collecting a considerable amount of data about this work - field notes, samples of children's work, records of book borrowing, observations and interviews (some by an independent interviewer). We have only just begun sifting through it but some findings are emerging.

First of all, take-up and participation - always a sign of how parents value a programme - has been good. No-one dropped out - despite considerable domestic difficulties in some cases. Participation in home visits was 100% - not one parent missed a single visit. All parents participated in meetings in school with an average attendance just over 70% - probably close to the maximum obtainable when one considers the range of family reasons which forced parents to miss sessions. So, what we have is a very high level of interest and commitment amongst parents.

Before the project, parents reported significant pre-existing literacy activity as we would expect from previous research. None of our families could be said to be completely non-literate and all parents clearly valued literacy. All children apparently saw parents reading on occasions (and many saw them writing too). All children had access to books (for some, rather inappropriate ones and perhaps only two or three), all

shared them at least sometimes with someone (not necessarily a parent), and all had some opportunities for drawing/writing. However there were variations too. A few parents had significant difficulties with reading and writing. About half the children had near daily experiences of book sharing or drawing/writing activities but for others they were quite rare. Some children owned 10 times as many books as others. Very few parents deliberately involved children in their own reading or writing and some even avoided reading or writing when the children were around. There was hardly any use of public libraries.

Our data indicate that <u>experience of the programme</u> was rewarding (for the project team as well as the families). Perhaps the most important point is that all the work we have described *did prove possible*. At the start, we were anxious about whether we could share our view of literacy development with parents (all those hard won insights of researchers one picks up from conferences like this!), and whether they would really do more to help their children's literacy. Now we know they welcome our ideas.

Finally, there is the question of <u>impact</u>. Obviously, without an experimental research design we have to be cautious here, but we do have *some* <u>indications</u>. Parents have reported that literacy activities have increased. Take the issue of parents

providing a literacy model. After the programme, *all* parents said that they read and wrote in front of the children and, more significantly, all but one said they now made a point of involving their children in such activities. One parent, for example, told us how, when she was buying from a catalogue, she gave her child a piece of paper so that "she thinks she's doing it too." Another said,

> "I'll say to him, 'Mummy's going to read a bit. You get your book and you read.'"

Parents are using opportunities for fostering children's development. For example, one said,

> "Before you came I never thought about her reading things like mugs and boxes and signs and things. We read all sorts now from the top of the bus."

Others have probably become more sensitive to devleopmental changes.

> "I noticed his writing more by going to the meetings ..... One time he was drawing it was all lines. Then after a few weeks he changed and started doing circles."

Use of books has increased greatly..

"I didn't make a point of reading with him before ..... He looks at books a lot more now."

The parents' comments tell us that we must be doing something right in this work. Let us finish with what three of them have said.

"I thought they had to be taught it in stages like teacher and pupil - but it's not. They're doing it all the time from day one."

"It's been an eye-opener for me - being told and explained to - that they can understand a lot more than you give them credit for."

"It's made me see more in children that I've never seen before. If it wasn't for the project I wouldn't have thought so clearly what children can do."

The project has given us a clearer view too - of how it *is* possible to work with parents in encouraging the emergence of literacy.

1. The Sheffield Early Literacy Development Project has published a booklet, Ways of Working with Parents to Promote Early Literacy Development, describing the Project methods for early years teachers and other interested workers. It can be ordered from:

   Publication Sales
   Division of Education
   The University
   Sheffield S10 2TN
   ENGLAND

   Price, including overseas air mail postage, £7.00. (Orders, including those from outside the UK, quoting a credit card number will be accepted.)

Early Literacy Development Project

The SHEFFIELD EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT is currently exploring ways of working with parents to promote children's early literacy development.

Programmes of at-home work with parents (home visiting) and in-school work (small group meetings) have been developed for families with preschool children. Insights from emergent literacy research as well as findings from research into parental involvement in the teaching of reading, literacy attainment in school, and preschool intervention have been used (Hannon, 1990).

Case studies are being carried out of a small number of families having different combinations of at-home and in-school programmes. Data include setting and sample characteristics, pre-programme interviews, field notes, samples of children's work, records of book borrowing, observations, and post-programme interviews.

Issues being studied include pre-existing literacy activity, levels of take-up and participation, implementation processes, and indications of impact.

Methods developed in this project are being shared with other workers through the publication of a booklet, Ways of working with parents to promote early literacy development (Weinberger, Hannon, and Nutbrown, 1990). Other reports are planned on the evaluation of methods, on training implications, and on research design for further studies of programme effects.

PROJECT TEAM

Peter Hannon is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Sheffield and Director of the Project.
Jo Weinberger is a Nursery Teacher in Sheffield and Research Fellow on the Project.
Cathy Nutbrown is a Co-ordinator for Under-Fives in the City of Sheffield Education Department.

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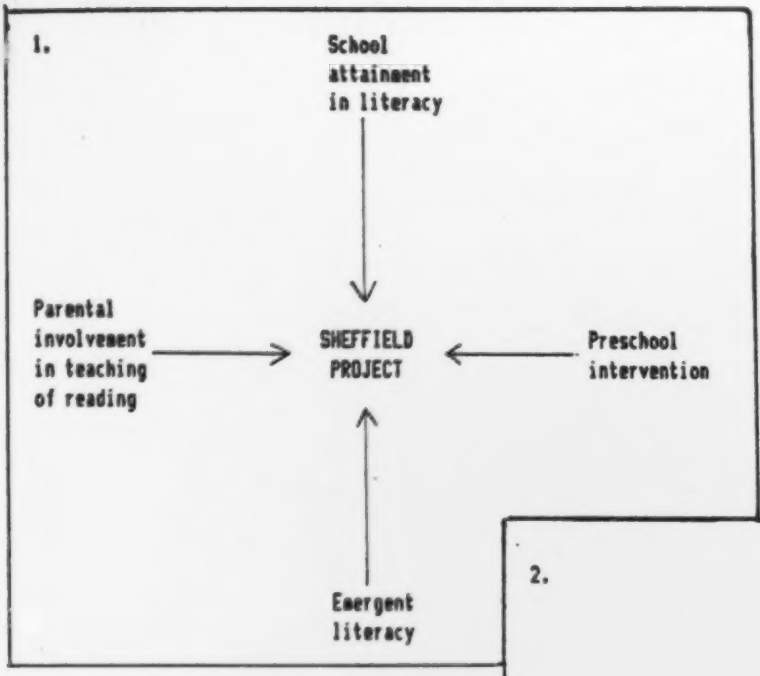

2.

STRANDS OF EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCE

		Print in environment	Writing	Sharing books
PARENTS PROVIDE	Model			
	Opportunities			
	Recognition			

3.